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Under which Conditions do Early Adolescents Need Maternal Support?

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### **Abstract**

Maternal support is known as a protective factor during infancy, childhood and adolescence. However, less is known about the conditions leading to support-seeking behaviors towards mothers in early adolescence. In comparison with younger children, it is assumed that the specific nature of these conditions changes with continuing cognitive maturation. To shed a light on the normative development of attachment-related behaviors beyond infancy and, more specifically, on the activating conditions for support seeking, 98 early adolescents were instructed to write about a distressing situation during which they needed their mother. Seven situational conditions could be derived from the data. Two not previously described age-relevant conditions, academic failure and social conflict, were identified. Notably, 60% of the reported conditions referred to situations Bowlby (1969/1982) originally proposed, empirically confirming the maintained importance of the same conditions as in early childhood.

**Keywords:** early adolescence, support seeking, attachment, affect regulation

Adolescence is characterized by changes in several domains, e.g. biological and psychological, with subsequent challenging developmental tasks like developing independence (e.g. Eccles 1999). Parental support helps to cope with these normative demands and, consequently, is seen as a resilience factor in the development of emotional problems (Helsen, Vollebergh, & Meeus, 2000). In the light of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982), the importance of social support from parents during adolescence is not remarkable, and research on social support could be framed within this broader theoretical model. According to attachment theory, distress activates the attachment system, inducing the need for the attachment figure's support (Bowlby, 1969/1982). Consequently, support seeking is seen as an attachment-related coping strategy that protects individuals from physical and psychological threats and that alleviates distress. Research in the attachment domain demonstrated that parents indeed remain primary attachment figures in early adolescence and that certain levels of distress still activate maternal support seeking (e.g., Kerns, et al., 2006).

Despite the continued relevance of support seeking with parents, less is known about the specific situational characteristics activating these behaviors in early adolescence (Dwyer, 2005). A better understanding of the distressing conditions under which older children need maternal support is required not only to shed light on normative support-seeking behaviors beyond infancy, but also to construct age-appropriate attachment instruments (e.g. Dwyer, 2005). Bowlby (1969/1982) proposed two broad categories of distressing conditions that contribute to the attachment system's activation. One category refers to threatened physical wellbeing such as illness, hunger, or pain. The second category refers to elevated anxiety due to exposure to threat and separations from mother. In infancy, evidence was found in favor of Bowlby's proposed categories of distress (e.g., Ainsworth, 1989). However, given early adolescents' cognitive maturation, it remains an empirical question whether their attachment system is activated by the same conditions. Moreover, early adolescents become less

dependent on a caregiver's physical availability and they become better in managing longer separations over larger distances. Hence, it is assumed that strangers, strange places, mild pain, fatigue, and hunger no longer elicit maternal support seeking (Maysseless, 2005).

Empirical research to which distressing conditions elicit the need for mother in early adolescence, is however rather scarce. Early adolescents report the need for mother when feeling sick, scared, sad (Kerns, et al., 2006), and lonely (Helsen et al., 2000). Moreover, they seem to seek mother's support in both emotional and instrumental emergency situations (e.g. friend is severely ill or when making an important personal decision) and instrumental day-to-day matters (e.g. borrow something) (Frey & Röthlisberger, 1996). The abovementioned studies provided adolescents a limited list of conditions to endorse. This approach might have ignored other relevant conditions that were not listed, and might have forced adolescents to overestimate the attachment-relevance of some listed conditions. To overcome this issue, Kerns and Siebert (2011) used an open ended approach and interviewed 94 children between 7 and 12 years of age, asking them about a time when they were sad, and a time when they were scared. Children reported feeling sad because of performance failures, physical injury or illness, social conflict, and loss of a family member or pet. Further, children reported feeling scared because of the dark or night, in anticipation of performance failures, scary media, animals, and people. This open-ended approach was valuable because it allowed selecting relevant attachment themes in this age group. However, the question in this study did not explicitly focus on support seeking to mother.

Therefore, we wanted to replicate and broaden the study of Kerns and Seibert (2011) targeting an older age group and using a different probe question that focuses more explicitly on the need for mother when feeling distressed. The aim of the current study was to get a clearer view on all relevant maternal support-seeking conditions in early adolescence. It is hypothesized that threats eliciting support-seeking behavior to mother in infancy and early

childhood, no longer activate attachment-related behaviors. Moreover, it is hypothesized that new themes, related to the challenging developmental tasks like building social relationships, can emerge.

## **Method**

### **Participants & Procedure**

The sample consisted of 48 boys (49%) and 50 girls (51%) with ages ranging 10-13 years ( $M = 11$ ;  $SD = .79$ ). All youngsters were Caucasian. One adolescent lived with mother since father's death, 80.4% lived together with both biological parents, and 18.6% had divorced parents. All early adolescents had their mother as primary attachment figure.

Participants were recruited from 5th and 6th grade of an elementary school. Parents were informed about the study by a letter distributed through school and all parents gave their passive consent. Early adolescents were fully informed about the study goals and methodology and about their right to refuse participation. They all gave their active consent. Participants were tested during regular school hours. The study was approved by the Institutional Board of the Faculty of Psychology at Ghent University.

### **Instruments**

Early adolescents answered to the instruction "Write about a time when something bad or annoying happened: a time when you were upset and you felt you needed your mother. Tell the story in as much detail as possible. Describe your thoughts, feelings and behaviours, as well as those of your mother. Describe how the situation ended.".

### **Data-analysis**

Nvivo 9, a qualitative analysis software product, was used to organize and analyze the qualitative data. An in-depth thematic content analysis was undertaken to identify key

categories. An independent rater (CB) coded all stories using the posteriori categories; the interrater reliability was good with  $\kappa = .82, p < 0.001$ .

## Results

Two participants gave two different answers, leading to a dataset of 100 entities. Four adolescents did not provide an answer on the instruction. Stories had a mean of 47.88 words (range= 5 to 122 words). Thematic analyzes indicated that across the sample, early adolescents reported seven conditions under which they needed maternal support (see table 1).

## Discussion

The aim of the study was to identify maternal support-seeking conditions in early adolescence. In contrast with our hypothesis, results indicated that the conditions Bowlby (1969) proposed are still crucial to understand early adolescents' attachment-related behavior. Physical discomfort (e.g. serious injuries and illness) was most frequently reported (33%) as a condition in which maternal support was needed. Second, 15% of the youngsters indicated they needed mother in the context of both short (e.g. getting lost in a supermarket) and long separations (e.g. divorce). Despite acquiring autonomy is an important developmental task in early adolescence and adolescents spend more time away from parents (Eccles, 1999), separation from an attachment figure remains an important maternal support seeking condition. Follow-up analyses revealed that children from divorced homes reported significantly more the need for maternal support when separated from the attachment figure than children from intact families (40% vs. 9;  $\chi^2(1) = 11.82, p < 0.01$ ). Future research should investigate the impact of a divorce and subsequent separations from attachment figures on the development of the attachment system. Third, 11% of the youngsters reported the need for maternal support to regulate anxiety. The level of anxiety varied from mild (e.g. due to

nightmares) to severe (e.g. life-threatening experiences). These findings indicate that the same stressors activate maternal support seeking in both early childhood and early adolescence.

As hypothesized and in line with previous studies (e.g., Kerns & Seibert, 2011), conditions related to age-relevant developmental tasks emerged. Nine percent reported the need for maternal support when receiving poor grades and having problems with schoolwork (academic failure); eight percent when having social conflicts. These findings are relevant as both conditions are considered important developmental tasks in early adolescence that can cause substantial distress. From middle childhood onwards, acquiring academic skills such as reading and arithmetic becomes an important developmental task. Second, there is an increased focus on peers and social acceptance in early adolescence (Eccles, 1999). As experienced failure to achieve one of both developmental tasks can elicit substantial distress (e.g. Kerns & Siebert, 2011), the need for maternal support is comprehensible.

Furthermore, results identified two other relevant support-seeking conditions. First, the loss of a family member or pet evoked the need for maternal support in nine percent of the early adolescents. The death of a loved one or pet was also identified as a situation related to sadness in previous studies (e.g. Kerns & Siebert, 2011). Second, 11 early adolescents reported to need for maternal support when encountering practical problems. The most frequently reported problem was the loss of an object. Adolescents reported to be upset and confused during these situations. This condition was not mentioned before in attachment research. However research in the domain of social support did find that practical day-to-day matters trigger maternal support-seeking behaviors (Frey & Röthlisberger, 1996).

Our research explicitly focused on maternal support seeking, since mother can be seen as the primary attachment figure in early adolescence (Kerns et al., 2006). Former research already indicated that children (7-12 year) can rely on peers, sibling, and teachers, but still

prefer parental above non-parental support during specific attachment-related situations (Seibert & Kerns, 2009). The current study deepened the role of maternal support by identifying seven specific conditions eliciting maternal support-seeking in early adolescence.

Some comments on the study can be made. First, it is unclear to what extent all conditions that emerged from this study reflect attachment-related needs. Theoretically, the extent to which conditions activate emotional distress determines whether the attachment system is activated. Therefore, it might be interesting to distinguish between practical needs versus more emotional needs. Second, individual attachment differences could have influenced the responses. For example, the non-responses might be typical for insecurely attached early adolescents. A third limitation was that 6% of the responses contained recollections related to preschool support-seeking experiences. However, category distribution was unaffected by the exclusion of these responses. Finally, further empirical research should include fathers to examine differential support-seeking conditions depending on mother and father.

To conclude, this study sheds further light on the normative development of maternal support-seeking in early adolescence. First, almost 60% of the early adolescents reported the need for maternal support in conditions that refer to Bowlby's (1969) originally proposed conditions: physical discomfort, anxiety due to threat and separations from attachment figures. Notably, not previously described sources of distress related to challenging developmental tasks (academic failure and social conflict) appear. The findings emphasize the ongoing importance of maternal support beyond early childhood and suggest that in essence, the goal of attachment-related behaviors remains the regulation of the same stressors as in early childhood. These findings are important to develop both new measurement instruments and research questions to further disentangle the protective role of maternal support in early adolescents' development.



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Table 1.

*Overview of the Maternal Support-Seeking conditions in Early Adolescence.*

Condition	Percentage
1. Physical Discomfort	33
2. Separation from attachment figure	15
3. Fear regulatoin	11
4. Practical problems	11
5. Loss of a family member or pet	9
6. Academic failure	9
7. Social conflict	8